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ABSTRACT

Integrated school-community projects benefit both the rural community and the rural school in many ways. On the community side, such projects can stimulate the local economy, improve the quality of life, and strengthen the bonds of community. Schools gain resources and community support for educational initiatives, have the opportunity to develop an academic program rooted in experience, and can help students connect to the roles and responsibilities of adult society. Integrated school-community projects are best pursued through a formally organized collaborative group. Collaborative arrangements give structure to the process of developing an initiative, can help to bridge the factionalism that often arises within a community, provide a forum for airing concerns in a productive way, maintain support and stability during changes in personnel or politics, increase the available pool of resources, and build local capacity for other community development efforts. Eight basic steps in the collaborative process are briefly described: convening a group, assessing strengths and needs, establishing purposes and priorities, learning to work well together, planning projects, implementing the plans, assessing the results, and sustaining achievements. This Collaborative Action Team process is undergoing testing and refinement at 22 sites in 5 Southwestern states. (SV)

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Benefits 2

School Development
Community Development
Economic Development
Youth Development

THE EXPONENTIAL RESULTS OF LINKING SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Southwest Educational Development Laboratory

Issue Number Five

Welcome to Benefits 2

***Benefits*[2] is a series of papers addressing ways that rural schools and communities can work together so that both will thrive. Previous issues described the great variety among school-community projects, and the changes and commitments needed to assure their effectiveness. This issue and the following one will focus on strategies for using a formal school-community collaborative to help plan and implement successful projects.**

By working in a collaborative group, you can help assure that your initiative will weather changes in personnel or politics.

Collaborative strategies for revitalizing rural schools and communities

Student-operated shops, newspapers, construction companies. Health clinics and day care centers staffed by students. Students organizing community clean-ups, monitoring water quality, recording and reporting local history. These are some of the many projects mentioned in previous issues of *Benefits*[2], activities that pump new resources and energy into rural communities while providing students with real-world learning experiences. These are the kinds of initiatives that can help restore community cohesiveness to rural America and strengthen academic achievement in rural schools.

Integrated school-community projects benefit the community in many ways. They can stimulate the local economy through entrepreneurial activities that generate income and encourage residents to shop "at home." They can help make the community a more appealing place to live, by providing needed services, improving the local environment, and offering quality education. And they can strengthen the bonds of community, encouraging residents to take part, and take pride, in local culture.

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Collaborative strategies, *continued*

Schools benefit in equal measure. Rural schools gain resources, directly through community contributions of time, expertise, or funds, and indirectly, through a strengthened local economy and broader support for educational initiatives. Schools develop an academic program that is rooted in principles of effective teaching and learning. And, perhaps most importantly, schools develop ways of coping effectively with "the single most important problem that American society faces in its effort to educate children," the fact that:

> young people [have] become segregated from the structure of responsibilities and rewards of the productive adult society. As a result, children and adolescents face historically unprecedented challenges in finding a sense of purpose in their schooling tasks and a sense of connection with adult roles of authority and responsibility. (Hoffer and Coleman, 1990, pp. 129-130)

There are many ways of setting up and carrying out integrated school-community projects. One important strategy for success is to establish a formal collaborative group and process.

Children and adolescents face historically unprecedented challenges in finding a sense of purpose and a sense of connection with adult roles of authority and responsibility.

Formal vs. informal collaboration

It's possible to set up service learning or entrepreneurial projects without a formal school-community partnership. You can work on an ad hoc or informal basis with local businesses or service groups. Some projects can even be carried out entirely within the confines of the school, although the most effective projects extend their reach into the community.

However, there are distinct advantages to organizing a group of school and community representatives that can plan and oversee your project, and to using a formal collaborative process to guide the group's operation. Those with experience in community-based projects strongly recommend a structured process. Bruce Miller and Karen Hahn (1997), for example, emphasize that:

> Activities cannot be random. There must be a process to build vision, identify strengths and needs, set goals, create time to share, build commitment, . . . provide for equitable sharing of ideas from across the community, and adequately plan. (p. 75)

Collaborative arrangements can help to bridge the factionalism that often crops up within a community. As Cathy Jordan, program manager of the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory's Rural Collaborative Action Team program, observes, "Small communities cannot afford to have their resources split." Yet factionalism and divisiveness often cripple efforts to initiate community-based projects or pass bond issues. By offering a neutral setting and process, an equal voice for all participants, and guidelines for keeping the focus on issues rather than personalities, a formal collaborative can help to bring all parties to the table and get them working toward common goals.

Especially in small communities, where people see one another in many contexts — at church, at school board meetings, in the post office — there is sometimes a tendency to avoid discussing controversial issues or to dwell on personalities, on *who* is talking rather than on *what* is said. But in order to get the work done, to identify goals and the means of accomplishing them and muster the support needed to carry them out, it is usually necessary to work *through* disagreements rather than to suppress them. The collaborative process provides tools and strategies for airing concerns in productive ways, and for making decisions that everyone can support.

By working through a collaborative group, you can help assure that your initiative will weather changes in personnel or politics. Good ideas need time to take root, but time also means change. Almost everyone who's worked in the public schools has seen a terrific program or instructional approach die when the teacher or administrator who nurtured it moved on to another locale. With a broad base of support, however, good ideas are no longer dependent on the energy and dedication of a few.

By having a collaborative group, you increase the pool of resources available to get the work done. Given the many responsibilities educators face these days, this is no small benefit—especially in rural communities where superintendents may serve double duty as principals, principals as teachers, teachers as bus drivers, and so on.

In addition, collaborative groups build local capacity for other community development efforts. According to one expert, "Many scientists and policymakers believe that the key to addressing rural problems lies in the 'capacity building' of local leaders and citizens," that is, in "enhancing the potential of local people to solve problems" (Hustedde, 1991, p. 111). As members of a collaborative group learn more effective ways of working together, they acquire skills — in planning, in leadership, in communicating effectively, to name a few — that they can apply in other contexts.

Steps in the collaborative process

Getting a collaborative group going involves eight basic steps. The process isn't perfectly linear; you'll be taking some steps simultaneously, and working back to others. The following paragraphs provide a rough outline of the process. The next issue of *Benefits*[2] will delve more deeply into some of the most critical aspects of collaborative work contained within these steps.

Convening a group. The first, and perhaps most critical, step is to bring together the people who need to be involved. The most basic requirement for a collaborative to succeed in the goal of supporting both school and community is that the group must represent *all* of the diverse populations that comprise both environments. As one guide puts it, "It isn't enough to simply round up the 'usual suspects'" (U.S. Department of Education, 1996, p. 13).

For manageability's sake, you may want to start with a small core group and then expand, but it is essential to draw in all the constituencies in your community. And don't forget to include students in the mix. Students need to have an active voice in determining the direction of their educational program. Moreover, Miller and Hahn note that "in rural communities, where the workload can overwhelm the capacity of the available adult population, students represent a hidden resource" (p. 15).

Assessing strengths and needs. Early on, the group will need to take stock of the school and community's needs, and of the resources and expertise you can access. This assessment may be formal or informal; some groups use inventories and needs assessment instruments, while others take a less structured approach. The important thing is to be thorough, and realistic, and to focus on assets as well as problems. When groups start with what SEDL program manager Cathy Jordan calls "a deficit perspective," they often feel overwhelmed by the obstacles they face. SEDL's collaborative approach emphasizes building from a community's strengths.

Establishing purposes and priorities. Finding a focus for the group, and stating that focus explicitly enough so that everyone in the group shares similar expectations, is another important step. One set of experts observes that, "for a collaborative to succeed, members should consider spending time . . . examining their assumptions of common intent in order to develop ways of accommodating inevitable differences in these critical underpinnings" (McClure, Jones, & Potter, 1996, pp. 395-396). Most guides for collaborative groups suggest developing a mission statement as well as specific project-by-project goals.

Learning to work well together. Most, if not all, members of the collaborative will bring with them some experience in working with a group. Experience, however, doesn't always guarantee effectiveness. And if you've done a good job of recruiting a diverse membership, it's almost certain that this particular configuration of folks has never before worked together. SEDL and other sources offer structured activities that can build the group's skills in working collaboratively. While some group members, anxious to get on with business, may resist such learning activities, taking time for skills-building can make a significant difference in your group's ability to achieve tangible results.

Planning projects. Groups sometimes tend to bog down in the effort to move from *what* to *how*. Deciding what's manageable, how to best use the resources available, working out costs and schedules, assigning tasks — all these require a clear sense of both the big picture and the many small pieces that must come together to complete the puzzle. Plotting out the details can be time-consuming and frustrating; again, groups need to resist the impulse to hurry through. For complex or ambitious projects, the planning phase alone may take six months or longer. One way of coping with the frustration of inaction is to build in smaller activities that can give the group a sense of accomplishment without diverting too much energy from the larger agenda.

Implementing your plans. Most people will tell you that planning is half the battle — and experience shows that to be true. However, many groups make the mistake of taking the other half for granted. Things never go quite as you intend them. There are always unknowns, from the weather to the chicken pox to miscalculations about time and money. As you put your plans into action, be prepared for setbacks, build in contingencies, and provide opportunities for revamping plans to adapt to changing conditions.

Assessing the results. People often think of evaluation as something that's needed only for grants or government mandates. But it's important to have a yardstick for success, even for the most modest of projects. Identifying your criteria for success — whether it's the number of townspeople who turn out for a community cleanup, or the ability of a student-operated enterprise to cover its own costs, or a decrease in the school's dropout rate — should be an integral part of planning your project. And specific provisions should be made for documenting to what extent those criteria are met. Such documentation can be valuable in several ways: to increase local support for the collaborative, to obtain funds from outside sources, to help the group feel a tangible sense of accomplishment.

Sustaining your achievements. Once you have implemented a specific project, it's time to determine whether and how it should continue. Can the activity be incorporated into the ongoing school operations? Are extra resources needed? What is the activity's logical lifespan? And, once the collaborative group's work is accomplished, what other priorities need to be tackled? With a good working group, you should be able to begin the process all over again: assessing needs, setting goals, planning new projects, and putting them into action.

Conclusion

In reading through this list of steps, you may feel some frustration at the repeated refrain, "Take time to..." When people come together with a purpose, they generally want to act, to generate momentum toward their intended goal. And, in fact, achieving a balance between preparation and action is perhaps the greatest challenge in collaborative work. Many groups hurry through the preparatory stages, only to have things fall apart because of unclear expectations or poor planning. Other groups bog down in preparation, becoming so comfortable in talking about issues or so grandiose in their planning that they never quite get mobilized.

The strategy suggested earlier, of combining long-term planning and development with small, manageable achievements, is the best way most groups have found to maintain a balance in the early stages of collaborative work.

Every recommendation that you "take time" — whether for goal-setting, for learning collaborative skills, or for planning — is grounded in some group's experience of failure, and in another's success. There is no quick solution, and, as SEDL's Cathy Jordan concludes, "You can't get things done just by meeting once a month." The time and energy required are sizeable — but the payoffs are equally substantial.

Resources

The *Southwest Educational Development Laboratory* offers tools and strategies that can help school-community collaboratives to run smoothly and to make significant, long-term contributions to both community and school. SEDL resources include a guide and materials for starting a Collaborative Action Team. This process provides a practical response to the question, "Just exactly how *do* you collaborate?" Now undergoing testing and refinement in 22 sites across Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas, the Collaborative Action Team process brings teams of school, home, and community representatives together to define a common vision and agree to share responsibility for achieving a mission they help identify. They learn to work together sharing programs, space, and students. Now, rather than competing with each other they collaborate to improve results for their community. For a limited number of sites, SEDL also provides ongoing training and consultations.

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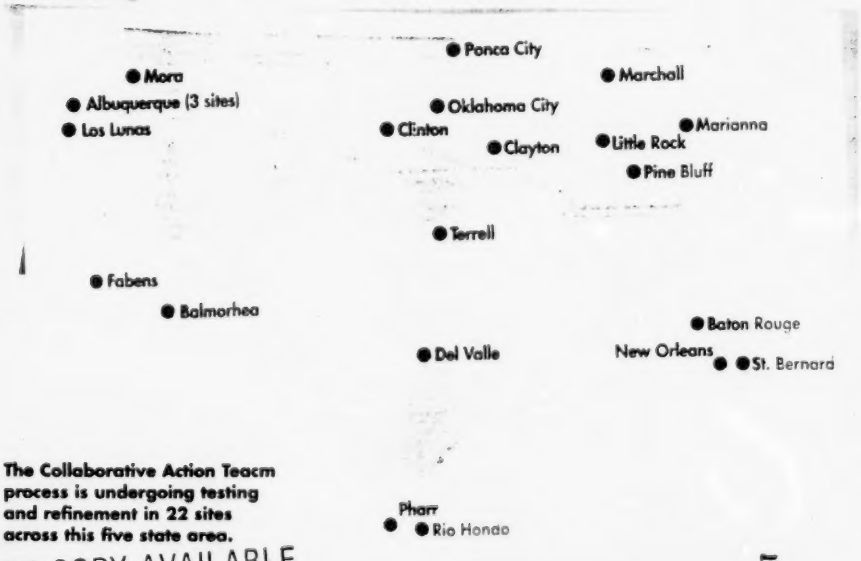

The Collaborative Action Teacm process is undergoing testing and refinement in 22 sites across this five state area.

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To learn about the Rural Development Collaborative Action Team project, visit our website at http://www.sedl.org/prep/ruralcats.html.

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